

THE GREAT UNION MEETING

IN PHILADELPHIA,

On the 21st of November, 1850.

MR. DALLAS addressed the Meeting as follows :

Fellow Citizens!—The Committee of Arrangement, through their Chairman, General Patterson, have handed me a series of Resolutions, prepared by themselves, to be submitted for the consideration and adoption of this meeting. That duty shall be performed. Before, however, these supposed expressions of your sentiments on the present occasion are read, you will allow me to claim your indulgent attention while I make a very few prefatory remarks explanatory, in advance, of their character, scope, and tone.

It is not my purpose to argue or to persuade. You are all aware of what has brought us together:—and if there be any one fellow-citizen here to whom argument or persuasion may be necessary, he need not listen to me. I will not waste or degrade my words, by arguing or persuading that Pennsylvanian who hesitates to stand by his country in her hour of trial.

No frame of government, fellow-citizens, is more difficult to construct than a Federal Union of Sovereign Republican States. History and experience prove how rarely such a task has been accomplished. It exacts, for its achievement, so much forbearance, so much sacrifice of local ambitions, prejudices, and interests, so much mutual conciliation and respect,—indeed, there is a necessity for the exercise of so much disinterested virtue for the general public good—that, amid the passions and follies of the world, mankind have mostly regarded it in despair, as a social and political work, too arduous, if not impossible of attainment.

To frame such a government is a labor only equalled in difficulty by that of maintaining it. Yet, when once established, and continued steadily in operation, all reasoning and reflection as well as experience convince us that it is the very best form by which to effect and secure the great aims and blessings of society. A federal Union of republican states gives to commerce, trade, and navigation,

almost unbounded extension and perfect security:—to arts and sciences, impulse, encouragement, refinement, and reward:—and to private rights, supported and powerful guaranties. It is essential for the purposes of personal eminence, national strength, national character:—and, above all, it furnishes a rallying symbol, imparting to the eye and heart of every patriot its lofty and endeared principles, bending with its protecting folds, in all quarters of the earth, its citizens to the shelter and respect.

Such a government—a federal union of sovereign republican states—was made for us, and has, thus far, unimpaired and unshaken, been transmitted to our guardianship. I will not unnecessarily remind you of the venerated men who formed it. You know as well as I do that their names are signals which awaken the homage of the good and great every-where, and that it is possible for human excellence and wisdom to outlive the storms of wicked and vamping malice, those Sages of the Convention of '87 must enjoy undying fame and universal gratitude. Our government, fellow-citizens, was formed by them, after long and painful and patient consultation. Their deliberations were conducted in this our city of Independence, close to the very Hall where most of them had, eleven or twelve years before, confronted, with recorded signatures, the policy and power of foreign tyranny. The Constitution, which they matured, underwent the scrutiny of every state successively: both in the ranks of the people, and in the councils of conventions:—it was ratified by the universal voice, and hailed as a work nobly done. Since the 30th of April 1789, the day on which George Washington took the oath of office as its Chief Magistrate in the city of New York;—I say, from that hour to the present, the government there prescribed has fulfilled every hope, and has accomplished for the American people all the great purposes of its creation.

What has it done for commerce and navigation? It has run up the tonnage from the humblest to the highest figure:—from three hundred and sixty thousand tons in 1790, to three millions five hundred thousand in 1850:—And it has swollen the aggregate value of our exports and imports from forty millions, to two hundred and ninety millions of dollars.

What has it done for population?—and let me say that there is no better or more significant test of the excellence of a government than that furnished by the increase or diminution of the numbers who remain voluntarily its citizens. In 1790, we were but three millions nine hundred thousand souls, we are now more than twenty-five millions,

What has it done for agriculture?—let the rich and extensive valley of the Mississippi reply:—whose fertility knows no exhaustion, and whose overflowing granaries are ready to feed another starving world.

What has it done for internal intercourse and trade? I will not venture to tell you in figures, the probable enlargement of this vast and bustling scene. It would sound like exaggeration. But as a

single fact, whence you may readily deduce the approximation to the wonderful reality of progress, let me inform you that in 1790, the number of your post-offices was seventy five, and that now, they are nearly seventeen thousand—besides the repositories for mails that are transported more than forty thousand five hundred thousand miles annually.

What has this government done for the *extension* of the home of the American people! It has expanded *the* *Atlantic* border over an entire continent:—with the *Atlantic* Great Lakes, the Pacific, and the Mexican Gulf washing its four fronts.

What has it done for the sciences and the arts? It has given them the most and anxious protection by every civilized people as *not* merely to the dignity and embellishment of life, but to the power, and security of nations. Were it possible to bring *back* earth the shade of Fulton, he might answer, by recounting with astonishment the advance of steam-navigation since he first slowly forced his way with paddles up the Hudson. Or go ask the single iron track on which the lightning express speeds its flight, enabling New Orleans and Boston to whisper, every minute or two, soft nonsense in each others' ears. Or enquire of the endless and interlacing railways which bring into close cluster our distant cities, penetrate to the sources of inexhaustible production, cement with iron clamps the members of the Union, and give unswerving and unerring facilities to the demands of the freest intercourse and the fullest trade. And lastly, as the crowning indication, read that which an English author has proclaimed to his countrymen to be "*the handwriting on the wall*," the victorious achievement of the American steamer—the Pacific!

What, again, has this government done for the Rights of Man, and the solace of humanity? Seek the pregnant reply in the scowling glances of every despot on earth:—or if you find it not there, consult the countless and welcome throngs of immigrants, as well from oppressed Ireland as the German Fatherland, from Switzerland and from Sweden, who hasten hither to enjoy the freedom, happiness, and consolation which their native lands denied.

And in fine, what has this Government done for the honor and renown of the American name? Go to the graves of Pike, Ripley, Gaines, Perry, Decatur, Hull, Jackson, and Taylor:—and gaze upon the eloquent standard you will find floating over them:—a standard which we all delight to contemplate: which, at home or abroad, fills every bosom with pride and exultation. And remember that a successful blow aimed at the Union prostrates the star-spangled banner forever.

Such, fellow-citizens, are some of the ripe fruits of our glorious confederacy. Not one of them, no, not one could have been achieved without it. Their rapid delineation I have thought due to the occasion:—and if I have spoken truly, as I know I have:—if these magnificent and ennobling results have, in the course of sixty years only, flowed from the government of 1789, are you prepared to

abandon, repudiate, and destroy it! (*loud and pervading cries of No! No! Never!*) Further, I should ask, are you not ready to bound boldly forward to protect it from the perils of rash domestic strife? Should there indeed, be supposed by any of our great speakers and great men of these latter days, some one or more defects to exist in this matchless Constitution of government, bear in mind that they must make it, with the modesty of true wisdom, incorporate among its provisions the principle and the pathway of amendment: - and thus invite these censorious pretenders to try their hands at improving, in the regular way, the structure of those master-works in Washington, Franklin, Madison, Hamilton, and Pinkney. Do so, if they can.

But, fellow-citizens, the immediate causes of the present danger and the inducement to your meeting, require my attention. At the session of Congress various and most interesting measures were enacted into laws. They were, the admission of California as a State into the Union, the arrangement of the northern and north-western boundary of Texas, the formation of territorial governments for our new acquisitions of Utah and New Mexico, the abatement of the slave-pens (as they were called, in the eloquent diction of the peculiar friends of their occupants) in the District of Columbia, and the act to provide for the delivering up of Fugitive Slaves. Involved, directly or incidentally, expressly or by implication, in all these measures, was the ever delicate and ever agitating question of Southern domestic servitude.

Now, they who framed our Constitution were neither fanciful nor fanatic. They laid the broad foundation of a Union of Sovereign States in a practical manner and for perpetual duration. They discarded Utopian notions. They took the sovereign states as they found them, with their respective local usages and habits and institutions, over which, for change or modification, they knew and felt they possessed no delegated power whatever. Their object was a general government, for purposes common to all their constituent commonwealths, and not a government whose consolidated powers would reach into domestic jurisdictions, and over-ride or absorb mere local institutions or laws.

In reference to the four first mentioned Congressional measures, I do not suppose you wish me to enter into any details. They are essentially irreversible, and cannot continue long to excite public feeling, whatever their merits or demerits. California, now a sister state, cannot be thrown back, or out, by any process of legislation. The boundary of Texas is definitively settled, not by Pennsylvania, nor Massachusetts, nor Virginia, nor New York, but by voluntary contract between the United States and Texas. New Mexico and Utah have forms of territorial governments assigned to them, upon principles strictly constitutional, and in no wise under the slightest danger of alteration. As to the much-hated slave-pens, their restoration is a matter too insignificant to be sought for by any one. There is but one of these measures liable to become, and which has, in fact, already become, the subject of serious discussion and of

alarming movement:—That is the Act *to amend and supplementary to the act respecting justice, and persons escaping from the service of their masters*, passed on 12th February 1793, and authenticated by the signatures of George Washington, John Adams, and James M. Smith. This act is denounced;—it has been made the cause of lawless and criminal violence—it has transferred the seat of lawlessness from Charleston to Boston:—it is made the prelude to a combined and simultaneous action subversive of the public safety and order, and fatal, if unchecked, to the government we live. I wish to utter a few short sentiments on the Fugitive Slave Bill.

In the first place, fellow-citizens, it is *the law*. It has all the forms and sanctions of federal legislation. It is a law upon our conduct and consciences as any other law in our code. As such, we owe it obedience. While in our free country the utmost liberty of discussion is permitted, and endless words in speech or in writing may be wasted in condemnation, let no man dare to resist its execution, by violence, who is unprepared to meet the penalties of crime. As surely as we value the institutions which as a people we have made:—as surely as we cherish our freedom, our security, our property and our peace;—so surely will we, not merely discountenance, but actively and inflexibly inflict the appropriate punishment upon every effort forcibly to defeat the law. Any other spirit, any other doctrine, puts at hazard, or rather in actual jeopardy, every thing which, as citizens in our public relations, or as men in our private ones, is most endeared to us. He who counsels opposition to the execution of a law by the strong arm, either aims at upsetting the government, or is one whose hand is against every man and against whom every hand should be lifted.

In the second place, fellow-citizens, I say—and with the full consciousness that hundreds are around me intimately acquainted with the text and deeply imbued with the spirit of our fundamental charter—I say, that this Fugitive Slave Law, in its substance, in its details, in all its features and all its provisions, is in *perfect harmony with the Constitution of our country*. (*loud and repeated cheers.*) Not merely that:—it not only harmonizes with, but it springs directly from, and is now necessary to the maintenance of the Constitution. (*renewed cheering.*) Do you suppose that, great and wise and beloved as were the men who made the Constitution, and who as years roll on become ten times more great, more wise, and more beloved in our gratitude and memory—do you suppose that even they would have been able to accomplish this mighty undertaking, had not the distinct, and mandatory guarantee for delivering up fugitives from service taken its firm and immoveable position in their plan? No, fellow-citizens, No! Of the twelve states, whose delegates affixed their honored names in Convention to that instrument, *one only* was, even in appearance, divested of slavery. That condition of labor was familiar to them all:—and a federal

Union which could be made for its absolute security, amid the seductions and temptations to escape consequent upon the creation of closer political ties, an unattainable work of which they never dreamed.

Again, the Fugitive Slave Bill, is *just*:—just to the fugitive, just to the master of his service, and just to the public. To the first, by the protection of legal forms and hearing:—providing responsible officers to direct the arrest, to identify the fugitive, and ultimately to supervise and authorize his removal to the second, in pursuit of his private property, to furnish immunity from lawless outrage by the presence and responsibility of public agents, and by penalties whose only aim are to enforce justice and to redress wrong. And to the third, to society at large, it is especially just, as it cannot but tend to forestall and prevent the disorders and riotous excesses which bad men unhesitatingly provoke in their utter contempt for feeble laws.

And finally, fellow-citizens, I say this law is an *expedient* one. After too tranquilly witnessing, for the last twenty years, the progress of an imported fanaticism, in its efforts to deprecate our Constitution and gradually to weaken the bonds of our Union, the critical moment has come, for deciding whether we will hold fast to the glorious government of our fathers, or immolate it at the shrine of reckless, senseless, remorseless abolition. I solemnly believe the country to be staked on the permanency and stern execution of this law. I will not advert to considerations which should especially impel us Pennsylvanians to remedy the evils by which the alarming state of southern exasperation has been produced. But I do hope that, here, within sight of the birth chamber of our national existence—*here*, on the spot where the states entered into the consecrated league and pledged each other their faith, for better for worse—we may utter words, true to constitutional obligations, true to honor, and true to the highest and holiest impulse of patriotism. Let us speak out. The emergency demands a frank and fearless loyalty. We should endeavour to rouse and rectify a public opinion that has remained too long and too injuriously inert. Our fraternal hail must soothe those whom a series of aggressions have driven to contemplate without recoil the precipice of disunion. Let us rekindle the almost extinguished confidence and friendship of our Southern brethren, by manifesting a determination to enforce their rights, and by showing that we deeply and sincerely sympathize in the sufferings and wrongs to which they have been subjected.

If ever it has graciously pleased the Almighty to give his blessing to any form of temporal polity, it was bestowed upon that of our Union. To continue worthy of that blessing, it must be upheld in its original purity:—and I know no mode so certain of preserving and sustaining it, as good faith in fulfilling every one of its obligations toward every one of its members.

(*Mr. Dallas* then read the resolutions which were frequently and warmly cheered, particularly those sustaining the Fugitive Slave Law.)

MR. DALLAS'S Letter to the Committee several days before the Meeting

GENTLEMEN :—I have just received your letter of the instant, conveying the information that you have selected one of one of the Vice-Presidents at the Union meeting. As the meeting honored by your choice it will not be in my power to perform duties, and I must therefore beg you to substitute another.

Having heartily joined in the popular movement, and with the hope that it will be instrumental in saving the Union from actual and augmenting peril, I throw myself forward, while venturing to intrude upon you my anxious communications, in the tone which can, for the great purpose designed, be assumed at the proposed meeting. As we are all actuated by the same feelings, I can persuade myself to believe that you will pardon, if you should not approve, my suggestions. Of the measures of adjustment adopted by Congress, only one can be affected by future legislation. The others are beyond the power of recall or modification. California is a State; the boundary fixed by her own assent; New Mexico and Utah have territorial governments upon the usual principles and forms. These things are done—conclusively and unalterably done. No sort of agitation can undo them; and the perception of this practical truth will, I feel assured, prevent their continuing subjects of agitation, either seriously or long. Not so with the Fugitive Slave bill. That has already been threatened with repeal—that is, therefore the point of danger. Now, in the existing condition of public feeling, North and South, mere generalities in favor of the Union will produce little or no effect. To speak impressively it is absolutely necessary to be specific; and on no topic connected with the Constitution and the rescue of the Union, can specification be equally beneficial as on the Fugitive Slave bill. Will you then excuse me for intimating that having exclusively in view the preservation of the Union and Constitution the obvious, if not the only direct and effective course is to proclaim the Fugitive Slave Law to be Constitutional, just and expedient; to call upon our fellow citizens to obey it as a necessary part of the Constitutional guarantee, which we are all bound to fulfil in good faith? Nor is this enough for us of Pennsylvania to do. More will naturally be expected. We have unguardedly heretofore lent a hand to impair the true spirit and meaning of the federal compact, by legislating adversely to the Constitutional right of pursuing fugitives from labor. That legislation has tended to bring into question our fidelity to the fixed guarantee of the Union; and has, in some degree, encouraged those who would cheerfully trample down, or break through the Constitution, and rend the Union, if by so doing, they can put an end to Southern slavery. Are we not then bound, when we see the Union in jeopardy, and when we assemble to do what we can to save it, to invoke the Legislature to retrace its steps, to repeal all the acts inconsistent with the integrity, and harmony of the Union, and especially to repeal those laws which inflict penalties on such of our magistracy as shall aid in sustaining our federal faith, and which deny the use of our prisons to citizens engaged in executing the federal laws? Can we stand absolved from reproach, if at this alarming juncture, and with ardent professions of patriotism, we pause half way in the path of candid inculcation, and fail to do what I have thus hastily and crudely indicated? Really, I think not. The country—the only country we have or ever can have—is at stake; and if we move at all to save it, let our movement be frank, fearless and effective.

Renewing my apology for addressing you thus freely I am, sincerely and most respectfully, gentlemen, your friend and obedient servant,

G. M. DALLAS.

To Josiah Randall: Chairman; Charles Ingersoll, Isaac Hazlehurst, John W. Forney. R. M. Lee, and John S. Riddle, Secretary—Committee.

November 14. 1850.



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